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ABSTRACT

C.M. Condit (1986) has pointed out that audiences regard characterizations as the most salient feature of any text. The power of identification or "the result of all the components in the rhetorical act" (K. Burke, 1945, 1950) is compelling. The power generated by viewers' responses to character-centered films can be harnessed in the classroom to overcome communication obstacles. For instance, students often minimize the role that sociocultural differences play in interpersonal communication processes. That attitude may change while watching "Dances with Wolves" or "Secrets and Lies." The students' identification with the film's key characters makes it difficult for them to dismiss the devastating consequences of social stereotypes and cultural clashes. In addition to the concept of identification, the medium itself helps students overcome communication obstacles. Because discussions focus on the behaviors of characters in the film instead of people in the classroom, they are less likely to trigger defensive reactions. The films' settings provide a common, but neutral, ground for discussion. Through character-centered films, students recognize how human reactions to human differences create communication obstacles. By looking through the film camera's lens, students can also see that the similarities among people are just as numerous as the differences. (An appendix list 16 character-centered films.) (NKA)

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Overcoming Communication Obstacles through Films in the Classroom

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Overcoming Communication Obstacles Though Films in the Classroom

by

Mary Anne Higgins

> *In such moments that occur not only in groups, but in individual responses to works of art, one is transported to a world which seems even more real than the everyday world* (Bales,1970, p.152).

Such is the world of movies filled with powerful character studies or character-centered films(see Appendix). As Condit (1986) pointed out, audiences regard characterizations as the most salient features of any text. She found that the character-centered nature of the civil rights text enhanced public participation in the Civil Rights Movement. As they read or watched Newsweek or the nightly news, members

of the public audience focused on stories about the individuals involved in the movement instead of accounts of the movement itself. Although they may have been frightened by stories about bus boycotts and freedom rides, they admired the courage of people like Rosa Parks and Medgar Evans.

Characterizations became points of focus (Condit) for members of the public audience, many of whom had denied the existence of racial inequities. The character-centered nature of the civil rights text changed their attitudes (Condit) because they understood the motivations and shared the values of the people they read about in magazines or watched on television. Because they identified (Burke,1945;1950) with Rosa Parks and Medgar Evans, they became proponents of civil rights for all Americans.

The power of identification or "the result of all the components in the rhetorical act" (Burke, 1945; 1950, p.273) is compelling. It is the same force that convinces viewers to suspend their disbelief of fantasy storylines while watching films like *It's A Wonderful Life* and *Field of Dreams*. Because they identify with the characters portrayed by Jimmy Stewart and Kevin

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Costner, they accept implausible storylines. Audience members join an interacting group whose culture creates a new reality (Bales). They share a common symbolic reality (Bormann, 1972) with the characters. They may discover it's a wonderful life after all and believe that someone would come if they built a baseball diamond in the middle of an Iowa cornfield.

The power generated by viewers' responses to character-centered films can be harnessed in the classroom to overcome communication obstacles. Denial, perhaps the most formidable communication barrier, is difficult to maintain after watching or while discussing character-centered films. Identification with key characters compels students to suspend their disbelief about the causes of communication obstacles.

For instance, students often minimize the role that sociocultural differences play in interpersonal communication processes. That attitude may change while watching *Dances with Wolves* or *Secrets and Lies*. The students' identification with the film's key characters makes it difficult for them to dismiss the devastating consequences of social stereotypes and cultural clashes.

In addition to the concept of identification, the medium itself helps students overcome communication obstacles. Because discussions focus on the behaviors of characters in the film instead of people in the classroom, they are less likely to trigger defensive reactions. The settings of the films provide a common, but neutral, ground for discussion. Discussions may occur in the classroom, but the film's action occurs in a distant locale.

Through character-centered films, students recognize how human reactions to human differences create communication obstacles. By looking through the lens of the film camera, students can also see that the similarities among people are just as numerous as the differences. Both acknowledgments represent important first steps in destroying communication barriers and building community.

Appendix

CHARACTER-CENTERED FILMS

BROUGHT TO YOU BY BARRIER-BUSTERS

Babe

Breaking Away

The Color Purple

Dances with Wolves

The Dewdrop Cafe

Ghosts of Mississippi

The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter

Love! Valour! Compassion!

My Left Foot

Nell

The Philadelphia Story

A River Runs Through It

Secrets and Lies

Shall We Dance?

The Shawshank Redemption

Ulee's Gold

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